

23 January 2016

Dear History–Social Science (HSS) Subject Matter Committee:

I write this letter to comment on chapter 15 (Grade 10), specifically with regards to the comfort women issue during Japanese occupation.

I was born in Korea, but immigrated and grew up in California. I am a proud product of the California public education system, including Cerritos High School and UC Berkeley. I am currently a professor of political science in Seoul, Korea, but my family maintains a home in Fullerton, California.

I have two sons (Jonah, James). Starting this fall 2016, I plan to send them to public schools in Fullerton to start their eighth and fifth grades. Among other reasons, I strongly wish for my children to receive a history-social science education that opens their minds to social complexity and scientific scrutiny, where students learn to assess competing claims and evidences. I wish my sons to receive the same education that I received, in which America is a great, imperfect nation, and we can learn from both her triumphs and tragedies. As high school students, we never shied from vigorously discussing painful issues of the past, such as our involvement in Vietnam. I loved my HSS classes, achieved a perfect 800 on the SAT History Exam, and eventually received a doctorate in political science at the University of Chicago.

I am sorry to say that the South Korean HSS curriculum lacks comparable level of complexity and rigor. I say this after five years of talking with my children and teaching university students. They are taught that Koreans are a virtuous people who were cruelly invaded and oppressed by foreign powers, especially Japan. This Manichean image shapes the media and educational discourse on the “comfort women” issue. My students firmly and unanimously repeat the claim that 200,000 Korean women were either abducted or forced against their will to serve as sex slaves to the Japanese army.

Korean students are either unaware of or brush off competing claims as pro-Japanese. Critics make several counter-arguments, notably:

1) Before and after Japanese occupation period (1910-1945), Korean governments also had a long history of recruiting poor women to serve as comfort women for foreign and native soldiers, including American soldiers in Korea and Korean soldiers in Vietnam. How do the actions of the Japanese government significantly differ from that of Korean or other wartime governments?

2) Claims that women were forced against their will to work as sex slaves mostly come from personal testimonies. But these testimonies may be tainted by nationalistic sentiments and financial incentives. Since 1993, when the campaign against Japan started, the Korean government provided significant financial and other benefits to women who claimed that they were sexual slaves; in 2016, 1.26 million won for general support, 1.05 million for medical fees, and government-subsidized housing and other benefits, or roughly three million won per month (\$2500) per recipient (Yonhap News, 22 Dec 2015). (In contrast, the Korean women who served American soldiers or the Vietnamese women recruited to serve

Korean soldiers in Vietnam receive neither money nor recognition.) How credible are these testimonies?

3) Claims of 200,000 Asian (mostly Korean) sex slaves come mostly from historians and journalists motivated by anti-Japanese bias. Studies from professional, objective scholars, such as San Francisco State Professor Sarah Soh (*Comfort Women*, 2008), suggest far fewer Korean women served as comfort women and that no documented evidence exists that any Korean women were forcibly abducted by the Japanese army. In fact, only 238 women actually registered (claimed) to be comfort women, despite the enormous financial subsidies (Yonhap News, 22 Dec 2015), which suggests that the 200,000 figure is highly inflated.

For such a controversial, complicated issue, such as comfort women, it is essential for scholars to freely and rigorously research these competing claims. To quote University of Chicago historian Bruce Cumings, “The way to bridge social and ideological conflict is to let the truth come out, let people debate the truth in a truly democratic manner, and thus use history to pursue reconciliation with those who think differently than you do.”

However, in South Korea, serious academic research and discussion is nearly absent. HSS textbooks and mainstream media are virtually silent about the comfort women for American soldiers or Korean soldiers in Vietnam, lest such discussion undermine Korea’s moral power over Japan. Having taught in Seoul for five years, I can attest to the pervasive anti-Japanese sentiment that discourages most professors from doing objective research on this topic or even discussing it during class. Any scholarship that contradicts the master narrative of Korean victimization faces social and governmental sanctions.

For instance, Sejong University Professor Park Yu-Ha published a book (*Comfort Women of the Empire*, 2013) that finds no evidence that the Japanese Government was officially involved in coercing Korean women. Rather, she writes that it was Korean and Japanese private brokers who forced or lured women into the “comfort stations”, where life included both rape and prostitution. Park’s findings are not surprising: they are basically the same as Sarah Soh’s earlier book (*Comfort Women*, University of Chicago Press, 2009), which is considered the definitive, English-language work. However, the judiciary criminally indicated Dr. Park, censored 34 passages from her book and ordered her to pay a total of 90 million won (\$74,719) to nine women who claimed that they former sexual slaves (Korea Herald, Jan 13, 2016).

Sadly, the suppression of academic freedom in Korea is supported by western governments that parrot the victimization narrative—especially the highly biased term “sex slaves”—without critical discussion. I am saddened that the public schools in California are also jumping on the victimization narrative, and fear that this will contribute to anti-Japanese hatred and the further suppression of objective, historical research.

I attach below my proposed revisions for the relevant textbook section. If you publicize my name, I will likely face sharp persecution in Korea; therefore, I like to avoid publicity.

But I wish to do what I can to promote academic freedom and critical thinking among the young generation, in both Korea and in California.

Please contact me for any questions or concerns. I appreciate your consideration.



Joseph E. Yi
Associate Professor of Political Science
Hanyang University, Seoul, Korea
010-5872-8823 joyichicago@yahoo.com

Chapter 15: Grade Ten – World History, Culture, and Geography: The Modern World

Page 49, Lines 914-924.

ORIGINAL:

“Comfort Women,” a euphemism for sexual slaves, were taken by the Japanese Army in occupied territories before and during the war. “Comfort Women” can be taught as an example of institutionalized sexual slavery, and one of the largest cases of human trafficking in the twentieth century; estimates on the total number of comfort women vary, but most argue that hundreds of thousands of women were forced into these situations during Japanese occupation. Finally, in August 1945, the United States unleashed its most deadly weapon, the atomic bomb, in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing more than 200,000 people, forcing Japan to surrender, and ending World War II. Teachers may ask students to debate the controversies regarding the American decisions to launch the attacks.

PROPOSED REVISION

“Comfort Women,” a euphemism for women who provided sexual services to the Japanese Army in colonial and occupied territories before and during the war, remains a high contentious topic. Some historians claim that this is one of the largest examples of institutionalized sexual slavery, with hundreds of thousands of women forced to serve against their will. Other scholars claim that only a relative few in warzone areas (e.g., Indonesia, China) were coerced by the army, and the vast majority were poor women recruited by private brothels, similar to the Vietnamese “comfort station” women who served Korean and American soldiers during the Vietnam War....Teachers may ask students to debate the controversies regarding the comfort women, the atomic bomb attacks, and other war-related topics.